

The man wore a billed cap pulled over his receding hairline and a worn jacket over his stained khaki uniform. The sunlight of a North African afternoon slanted across the small room as he sat in front of the old Corona typewriter in his apartment in Oran, and rested his hands on the roller, collecting his thoughts. Then he put one sheet of paper in and began typing, slowly and deliberately. He knew he would never be able to tell most of the story. The censors would cut it. But maybe he could tell enough that people would understand what he had to leave out.

In the desert, the front lines are loosely drawn and it's said that often there are groups of our boys sitting a few hundred yards from theirs and you don't know this until the sun comes up, the frost dries off the binoculars, and you see the uniforms aren't ours. That's when you beat a fast retreat and hope the guys behind you are on your side.

I got a chance to go on a supply run to meet the boys at the other end of the Allied lines. I was there with a friend, Gavin Langborne, one of the British correspondents riding in the same trucks. We actually had been planning to switch to a different convoy at the oasis at Sidi Omani but then the convoy got attacked and we didn't get a chance to leave. So, our driver, Danny Kogslaver of Martinsville, Texas, hit the gas pedal and we took off into the desert. The tarps on the trucks got pretty shot up but we just lay on the bed and watched out of the back of the truck. I was happy to have the steel combat helmet I'd found abandoned on the road.

The Germans had us pretty much cornered when they attacked. We'd just come out of a steep rocky mountain pass into a sandy plain of camel thorn bushes and boulders the size of our trucks. They were waiting for us with a couple of tanks, and some trucks with machine guns on the tops. There was one officer, the leader I suspect, in an armored car and he went after the first truck that made it out. That was our truck, and he was catching up with us when two American jeeps came out of nowhere, sand flying from under their wheels, and firing bullets at the German. The officer swerved, we swerved, and the two jeeps curled around, still firing. There was a cloud of dust raised by us all.

It looked like a game of tag from our viewpoint because the gun trucks started after the jeeps, abandoning the convoy which was pretty much disrupted anyway with trucks all going every which way, the jeeps dodging the Jerries, and the Germans dodging the jeeps.

We left them all behind in a cloud of dust, and a couple of hours later made the depot. The British ran it, and these guys are true professionals after two and a half years here in the desert. They weren't really happy to see us, not at all, but their captain who asked that I not use his name, did ask about the raid.'

After we explained what happened, he laughed. "Red Fox surprised them, eh? I'm not surprised."

"Red Fox?" Gavin inquired politely. They were both Brits and came from the same area of the country, and Captain M- was comfortable talking with him, while he wasn't comfortable with my American accent.

"There's something you can write about," M- said briskly. "If you can get them to talk. Don't use that codename, of course."

"Of course not," Gavin murmured. "But who are they, sir?"

"The Rat Patrol. One of the Long Range Desert Groups, the scorpion blokes." He looked at us with mild puzzlement. "You know, the desert scorpion is their insignia?"

I'd heard of the Long Range Desert Groups but never thought I'd have a chance to talk with any of them. Most of the American troops didn't really believe they existed or that they lived up to their reputations, while the British kept their usual stiff upper lips, until the third whiskey of course, and then they loosened up.

Captain M- eyed us both, then hailed his aide, a tall young man with a shock of black hair and muscular arms. "Jackson (not his real name), has Moffitt and the others come in yet?"

"Not yet, sah. They are expected in later tonight or tomorrow," the non-commissioned officer replied. "That is if the Jerries let them."

"Or if they're still chasing Dietrich after that attack on the convoy," Captain M- replied sourly. "How'd he knows the trucks were going to be there?"

"Cairo's a sieve, sah," Jackson offered. "Someone probably tipped them off."

"The convoy was headed towards Sidi Omani," Langhorne said. "I don't know how we ended up here, or where we are."

"That's the way we're keeping it," was the officer's retort. "I don't want Dietrich sniffing around here. Put a bloody shot through his head if I see him. I think we'll put you up for a while until we have some trucks going out. Oh, and one other thing, gentlemen?" He held out his hand. "Your notebooks."

Gavin bridled and so did I. "Our books?"

"Security."

"No, sir, I'm not giving up mine," I said. I could feel the edges of the book in the outer pocket of my jacket.

Captain M- frowned and stood, and I thought we were going to be stripped to our skivvies by the soldiers when he asked, "Then I have your word of honor that you won't mention this place?"

"Yes, sir," we chorused.

"If you break it, gentlemen, I'll see you are shot even if you are in Berlin. Dismissed!"

"Who is Dietrich?" I asked Jackson as we followed him out of Captain M-'s tent into the depot. It was quite busy for something buried in the middle of rolling sand dunes.

"Bloody German pest," Jackson replied. "Moffitt'll tell you more. "

"Who is Moffitt?"

Jackson led us into a tent, swathed in layers of camouflage. We could see four camp beds, a small table, unlit lantern, and a pile of bedrolls. "Latrine's down the way there, and don't get lost. The Captain's not joking about the firing squad."

"Who is Moffitt?" I asked again, and Jackson grinned.

"I'm putting a guard on you two who'll probably tell you all you want. His name is Peterson and he was with the Rat Patrol while one of their blokes was wounded. He's an American. I'm sure he'll be happy to talk to a fellow Yank." Jackson left us.

We promptly started making the tent home by unrolling the bedrolls and setting up the beds. After finding the latrine, we came back there in time to meet a puzzled-looking young man who was standing by the tent, his rifle slung over his shoulder. He had a couple plates of food for us. No mess tent tonight. Captain M- didn't want us eating with his troops.

Jack Peterson from Henryetta, Oklahoma, is a young man, like so many of our troops over here. There was a harder look in his eyes, like he'd been around for a while, but most of the time he could have been one of the new guys fresh off the docks and eager for the first battle.

"Moffitt? He's the Brit," was Peterson's reply when I asked him as we sat in the tent. He pulled out a camp light, sheltered it properly, and, finally, we could see each other's faces. "I mean I'm not surprised M- thought of him first. They both come from the same kind of place, college guys, though Moffitt's a professor or something.

"Professor?" Langhorne asked around a mouthful of fried eggs. That was one thing they had enough of in North Africa—eggs. The hens were working overtime and the farmers couldn't get them to the towns.

“Yeah, studied the Arabs and the history of this area before the war. Good guy, but stiff-like, till you know him. I was his driver for a while until Tully came back from the hospital.”

“Tully?” I asked.

Peterson ticked off his fingers. “The Rat Patrol’s four guys—Sergeant Sam Troy, one of ours, Tully Pettigrew from Kentucky, Mark Hitchcock, they’re the drivers, and Sergeant Jack Moffitt who is from...uh, Cambridge, I think.”

Langhorne sat up. “I know a Professor Moffitt. He lectured at Oxford one time on Roman History. But he’s an older man.”

Peterson shrugged. “Not the same guy. Moffitt’s a couple of years older than I am. He’s been in the desert for a while.”

“How about the others?” I asked.

“They’re American commandos. They disrupt German convoys, infiltrate, hell, anything they’re asked to do,” Peterson said cheerfully. “Probably one of the few mixed groups out there.”

“How’d they manage that?” I questioned carefully. Politics back at headquarters was fairly proprietary about keeping the armies apart.

Peterson shrugged again. “Dunno. Maybe good will? I’m here because my last truck got shot to hell and they’re fixing it in the depot. Didn’t figure I’d see the guys, though.”

“They’re coming in tonight?”

“If they make it,” Peterson replied in a serious tone. In the dimness I saw his hands tense. “They’re pretty independent. Take a helluva lot of chances.”

“You think they didn’t make it?”

He laughed. “They’ve got nine lives each. They’ll be in. In fact, you’re in their tent.”

Langhorne and I exchanged nonplused looks. “Their tent?”

“The visitor’s tent. Probably Captain M-’s idea. If they make it, I’ll scrounge up some more beds.”

We heard engines and rumbling and knew that some more of our convoy had made it in. Peterson looked at each of us, and shrugged. “Come on. Keep your heads down.”

Two of the trucks came in and the depot’s troops poured out to unload the supplies and hide the vehicles. They had just finished when another engine roared, then the sound doubled.

“That’s them!” Peterson said with a grin. “It sounds like Hitch’s driving. Good. I owe him a pack of bubble gum.”

The two jeeps that roared in were battered and dented, and the men in them all wore their dust goggles and scarves against the persistent dust and sand. They were an eccentric, individualistic bunch from their hats to the way they sat. Driving the first jeep was a young blond private wearing a red kepi. The sergeant sitting in the back seat had one hand on the fifty-millimeter machine gun mounted on a pedestal.

The driver of the second jeep wore a steel pot helmet. His partner sat in the other front seat, wore a black beret and scarf around his neck. All four men were coated in dust, which made them blend with the camouflage around them.

The jeeps ground to a stop in the middle of the square, and a team of soldiers, all armed with brooms, headed out into the desert to sweep away the tracks. Briefly, I saw the stars bright in the night sky, before the drapes hid it.

The first sergeant to enter pulled down his goggles and the kerchief that hid his face, then climbed out of the back seat. He saluted Captain M— who had come out of a tent; M— returned it.

“That’s Troy,” Peterson muttered. “Been out here a long time. The one with the beret’s Moffitt, the guy in the red cap is Hitchcock and the other one’s Pettigrew. Most of us call him Tully.”

The others had climbed out of the jeeps, stretching stiff legs and clustering around Troy, who was talking to the captain. Finally, the officer nodded and stepped back. “Get some supplies before you leave, Troy.”

“Yes, sir.” They exchanged salutes. Troy turned to the gawky youngster who was probably the

depot's supply chief and they went off together, leaving the others leaning on the jeeps.

"Lemme see if I can get their attention," Peterson said. He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Hitch! Bubblegum!"

The blond driver looked around with a bright smile and raised his hand as did Moffitt. Pettigrew turned in mild interest but said something that made Moffitt laugh.

Hitchcock said something then walked towards Peterson. Behind him, the other two headed for the mess tent.

"You got something for me, Peterson?"

"Hey, I owed you!"

"You sure do, buddy!"

Close up, Hitchcock is a fine example of young America. Corn-gold hair, blue eyes, a firm glance that eyed us with a certain amount of curiosity. His accent places him in the New York area, maybe Long Island.

Peterson handed him a pack of gum, that made Hitchcock smile broadly as he pocketed it. "We're even."

"Like hell," Hitchcock retorted. "This is the first down payment."

"My life is worth more than one pack of Topps bubblegum?" Peterson joked. He waved at Langhorne and me. "These guys are reporters, Hitchcock. Came in with a convoy that got shot up—"

"The one earlier today?" Hitchcock asked. "We chased them off."

"Yeah," I said. "Thanks a lot."

"My pleasure," Hitchcock replied. "Hunted Dietrich for miles before we had to give up. We're short of gas."

Langhorne frowned. "Was that what we were carrying? We're bloody lucky to not have gotten blown up!"

"Naw, they would'a wanted your gasoline," Hitchcock assured him. "Probably dumped you in a holding camp or shipped you to Italy if you got caught."

"Does he try that often?" I asked. "The German...Dietrich?"

"Dietrich was in the desert before we were—he's probably the leading junior officer in this part of the desert, has to be now he's been around so long. Speaks some Arabic, pretty good English—hell of a guy from what his troops say. Gotta respect him, though there are times when...never mind." Hitchcock fingered the gum as if it were a pistol. "Ever since our guys started landing, he's been attacking a lot more of our trucks for gasoline and food. Troy thinks that he's gotten orders from Rommel to get supplies from anywhere since we've cut off a lot of their supply lines."

For a private, Hitchcock was well informed about the situation around here. Most privates or even many above that rank didn't care.

"Hitch!" Troy had returned to the jeeps. "They're going to resupply us. Get some food."

"Nice to meet you," Hitchcock said, nodding towards me and Langhorne. "Remember, Peterson, I want some more gum next time."

Peterson shook his head. "Not a chance, buddy. I'm outta that loop."

Hitchcock laughed and headed to where Troy was awaiting him. The sergeant was eyeing us suspiciously. I knew that Hitchcock was probably going to be cross-examined about what he'd said.

"Looks like they're heading right out. You're not supposed to go in the mess tent," Peterson said abruptly. "Sorry, guys."

We knew that was true, and if we didn't want to spend the next several years in the desert, get shipped back home on the first transport, or dropped out of a plane, we'd better follow orders. Leaving behind the tempting jeeps, and the laughing men, we went back to our quarters.

Later that night we heard the jeeps heading out, and the muffled sleepy cursing of the soldiers who were out dusting off the jeep tracks before the German morning aerial reconnaissance flight.

Langhorne and I were shipped out the next morning on the three truck convoy. There were two men per truck, and us, making eight men in all, heading back to the coast. At least we think that is where they were headed since Captain M— didn't fill us in on the plans. The barrels in the back were empty of their gasoline and water, so they rattled every time we ran over rocks, and I think they could have been heard in Chicago through the morning air.

In the desert the sand is always in the air, like a faint mist. Langhorne and I sat at the back of Peterson's truck, the last in the three-vehicle convoy, looking at the cloud of dust left behind us.

"Wonder if we'll see them again?" Langhorne finally asked.

"Who?"

"The Rat Patrol. They're an example of what we should have more of in this war. Joint Allied operations."

"So, you'll let me see your copy before filing to your paper?"

Langhorne laughed. "Over my dead body."

Several hours into the trip the trucks pulled over before their radiators overheated, and everyone clambered out to take shelter from the hot sun. There was no appetite for lunch though there was for water.

All of the drivers were Americans, with Peterson as a leader. They took turns keeping alert for any attackers, but soon we were all asleep in the shade. After all who would be interested in three trucks full of empty cans?

The Germans took a leaf out of our commandoes' books and snuck up on the sentry, Charlie Lewis of Kansas City, Missouri, who was injured by a thrown knife.

Peterson started firing when he heard the strangled gasp. I don't know how he recognized the danger but maybe his senses were more acute from traveling with that group.

Langhorne, who had fallen asleep holding several sheets of paper, hit the sand so hard he bruised his nose and started bleeding. I lay beside him hoping like hell that the Germans wouldn't shoot us. War correspondents don't carry weapons to defend ourselves.

I felt bullets cut through the fabric of my jacket, and just kept my head down.

Men screamed as the bullets hit them. German and American—you can't tell the difference by the sound. Finally, the firing stopped and I heard cautious footsteps nearby.

A gun barrel nudged me in the side. I looked up at a German soldier, who was silhouetted against the sun.

That was when I realized that the bullets had scored my back and my left thigh, and it felt like someone had branded me. Beside me, Langhorne was too quiet. Was he dead? I put up my hands.

The German called out, and an officer came around the corner.

Tall. Thin. Hair bleached gold by the sun and a tan that looked as dark as a redwood. His uniform was frayed, sandy, and looked as if it had been worn for too long. His face was quite alert, though.

"You are?" he asked in perfect English.

That took me by surprise. Funny, I never thought they spoke anything but German. "I...a war correspondent..."

"So, I see by your insignia," he replied. "Your friend is wounded?"

Langhorne had a bloody face, but I thought it was from his nose. He didn't look dead. There is a look to that, when the heat of the blood fades and the body goes lax. "I think he's still alive."

"Good. I am sorry to interrupt your journey but I need these trucks."

"The trucks? There's nothing...ah, um..."

"Yes, I'm sure there is nothing," he replied with a youthful grin. "But I would like to see your notebooks." He held out his hand.

I didn't feel like disputing it with the winner of this gun battle. I didn't think that he'd act like Captain M—so I reached into my pocket, and handed him the battered notebook. It wouldn't do him any

good. My handwriting is pretty terrible, and besides I hadn't done any writing since we left with the convoy.

He flipped the pages, frowned, then turned some more. He closed it and handed it back. "I have enjoyed your columns in the past, and I am glad you are not injured. Perhaps you'll give me your friend's?"

I handed him Langhorne's notebook and ignored as best I could the pages in his hand. That was the recent stuff—including a few comments on the depot. Luckily, they were covered with blood, and in fact, the ink had also run. They were illegible.

The officer flipped, scanned, then handed it back to me. "Nothing. Josef!" He gestured to us, and gave an order in German to the soldier, then went off.

I could see that four of the drivers had been killed in the battle. Peterson was badly wounded judging from the blood on the front of his jacket, but a German medic was patching him up. The sentry was dragged around the trucks, dazed from a wound in his shoulder, and blow to the head. The Germans had already patched him up.

I heard the sound of engines and realized the Germans were bringing up their vehicles. They don't sound like Allied trucks.

Langhorne stirred beside me and rolled onto one arm. He put his hand up and felt his nose, then saw the blood. He sniffed and winced, tears coming down his face.

"How are you?"

He sniffed again, sat upright. "All right. Who's that?"

"He's in charge."

"Do you think it's that Captain Dietrich that Captain M— disliked so much?"

"Shut up!" I hissed.

The German officer began studying a pile of papers that had been in the front of the first truck.

"That's what he wants," Langhorne muttered. "Maps."

That's not all he wants. He wants the supply dump. "There's nothing on them."

"So, what is he going to do?"

That became clear a half hour later. The Germans drove off with two of the trucks after draining half the gasoline from ours. He left behind him us, the sentry and Peterson, and ten neat little mounds of sand, with markers for the Germans and the Americans. The afternoon wind blew through the dangling dog tags like a musical chime.

I dragged myself over to Peterson who was lying against one of the wheels. He flicked open his eyes. "Hiya."

"What are we gonna do?"

Peterson smiled crookedly. There was blood on his mouth. The bullet must have nicked something inside. "There was nothing on the map."

"So what?" Langhorne asked sitting beside me.

"He wants us...to go back to the dump," Peterson said weakly. "To lead him...to the dump."

"That's the only way you'll get the medical help you need," Lewis said bluntly. "The gasoline they left behind would be enough."

Peterson grabbed his shirt, then let his hand drop. "We stay here."

"And die?" Lewis asked incredulously. He ignored the blood stain.

"We can't lead..."

"Them back there, chum," Langhorne finished the sentence. "If the Jerries get that dump it will lead to more deaths."

"So, we just sit here and die?" Lewis questioned, his eyes wide. "Hell, Jack, you're dying!"

Peterson's eyes were closed but he managed a faint smile.

I wasn't too thrilled with the situation. We'd either turn into petrified mummies from dehydration for the next convoy to find, or the Germans would come back for the truck when we didn't move out, and shoot us all. Actually, I doubted that the captain would do that. He didn't seem the type to patch a

soldier up, then shoot him callously later. But then again, if he was frustrated, who knew what he was capable of?

Peterson's chuckle was a ghost of what it had been a night before. "Dietrich... will be back. He's... probably watching out there. Waiting..."

Lewis glared around. "Damned Kraut. We're just goddamn bait to him."

"He's...not the kind who..."

"Rest now," Langhorne said authoritatively. "Let's see what we have left in the way of food and water."

My leg and back hurt but I followed him to the back of the truck. Captain M— had given us enough food for the day and we hadn't eaten it, but we were short on water.

I surveyed the barrels. "Think there's any water left in them?"

"No," Langhorne said, leaning on the back of the truck. "Just the canteens and what's in the radiator. If we're going to move it'll have to be at night."

"Move?"

"Are you going to die here?" He looked me straight in the eye. His face and jacket were still bloody from his nosebleed.

"What do you have planned?"

Langhorne pointed to the path ahead. "Go as far as we can in the truck, then walk. Hope to meet someone who can help."

"Think the Krauts will let us?" Lewis demanded coming up unexpectedly. "Hell, they're probably out there right now, ready to shoot us if we don't go the right way."

"What about Peterson?" I asked.

"Put him in the back and go. Someone stays with him until we find help," Langhorne said succinctly. "It's all I can think of."

"I wonder if his friends are around?" I said looking at the blinding sand. The sun was starting on its way down but the sands shimmered in the heat.

"Friends...oh, the Rat Patrol?" Lewis said. "Heard them say they were headed east."

"Too bad," I commented. "We could use them."

"Let's get Peterson into the truck," Langhorne commanded.

"Dump the barrels," Lewis suggested. "Less weight."

We spent four hours dumping barrels out of the truck. I haven't worked that hard since before I went to college. Some of the barrels did slosh and we discovered the faint remnants of gasoline that had been hard to pour out. What little we could we put in the truck's tank.

Then we moved Peterson into the truck bed, and climbed inside.

Lewis was the driver, with Langhorne beside him. I sat in the back with Peterson.

We'd barely gone a mile before someone fired at us.

"Christ!" Lewis cursed and stopped.

"What is it?"

"Jerries," Langhorne answered. "They're blocking the road."

"Not going to let us go anywhere but back, eh?" I said.

Beside me, Peterson chuckled. "He's...not stupid," he whispered. "Dietrich..."

"We can call his bluff," Lewis said grimly. "See if he'll blow us up—"

"Are you crazy, man?" Langhorne questioned in sheer disbelief. "Go back."

"Back!"

"Back. To the barrels. We can set off the gasoline there, a dirty smoker, and maybe someone will see us."

"Or the Krauts'll kill us all!"

I saw Langhorne put his hand on the wheel, stopping Lewis's movement. "What choice do we have?"

Silence. I could hear Peterson gasping beside me. There were tears running down his face and he was pale.

“Get back and send up the signal,” I finally called. *And if Peterson dies, then we can bury him with the rest.*

For some reason, the trip back to the barrels was faster than the trip out. Maybe it just seemed that way.

The sun was almost to the horizon and it was going to be a beautiful night, but cold. I wasn't sure if we were going to be there the next morning. I doubted Peterson would.

I climbed out and helped the others with the gasoline. We took part of the camouflage canvas that had been over the truck and doused it, then with a grand flourish, Langhorne took out his lighter, and using some dried camel thorn bushes, set it ablaze.

It stank of gasoline and rotted canvas and mold but the fire caught and a long plume of dark smoke went up.

“What about the Germans?” Langhorne said looking around. “This should bring someone out of the rocks.”

“We know they're around. Let's eat something and get ready for them,” I suggested.

There wasn't much water left. We each had a mouthful, and gave some to Peterson, then sat around our fire, feeding it thorns and whatever would burn, including Langhorne's bloodied papers. The flames were a lovely sight as darkness fell, sputtering with an occasional cascade of sparks that danced like fireflies in the trees back home.

Lewis was resting his forehead on his knees as he sat beside Peterson, and Langhorne was hunting for camel thorn when I saw a man step out of the darkness behind him.

And worst of all, I recognized him.

“You didn't go back,” Captain Dietrich said accusingly. His pistol was pointed directly at me. “You were supposed to take your man back to the doctors!”

“He didn't want to go,” was my reply and it was a weak one.

Dietrich smiled. “Stubborn enough to let himself die out here for what? We **will** find that dump.”

“Not from us,” Lewis said though his toughness was a flimsy façade that we could all see through. He was only twenty, in pain from his wound, and he didn't want to die here.

The captain debated for a second, then ordered, “Throw away your gun.”

Both Lewis and I heard the sound of footsteps behind us. The Germans had us surrounded again. Lewis tossed his machine gun away.

“I will take you all to my camp,” Dietrich ordered. “There is a doctor there who can help him.”

“Thought you were going to let us die,” I said with a touch of anger.

“You were supposed to take him to the depot!” I realized that the German captain was more than a little annoyed by our actions. “I never intended for him to die,” he continued. “I wanted you to go back to the depot.”

“Fraid not,” said a voice I'd only heard once but will never forget. “I think we can get Peterson some help faster than you can, Captain.”

I turned my head and saw Sergeant Troy standing just inside the circle of firelight. He had his pistol out as well—aimed at Dietrich.

“A standoff, Sergeant. My men have surrounded this camp—”

“So have mine,” Troy said grimly. “And reinforcements as well. You might as well surrender, Dietrich—”

“Surrender?” Dietrich looked offended. “I have more men than you do, Sergeant.”

“You sure about that?”

Dietrich hesitated for a second. “Your man is badly wounded, Troy. Shall we stand here and wait until he dies?”

“Once you surrender, then all we have to do is take him—”

There was a crackle of a machine gun. Both Troy and Dietrich fired.

I admit that I was flat in the sand as fast as I could be. Lewis scrambled for his gun while Troy and Dietrich seemed to fade like ghosts into the night.

More gunfire. I just lay there watching the fire burn out. There was a scream that stopped with more firing, then nothing but the night wind and the crackling flames. Suddenly that went out there was nothing but the smell of ashes.

The sun was above the horizon when I awoke the next morning. The fire was out, Lewis was nowhere to be seen but Langhorne was lying beside Peterson, snoring loudly.

I crawled over to Peterson and saw he was still alive, though I didn't know how. He was in a coma, breathing shallowly.

Cautiously, I got to my knees and looked around. The landscape was empty except for our poor truck, the barrels and the graves. Whatever had happened in the night had left no traces.

I staggered over to the truck and pulled out the last of the rations, and took them back to Langhorne and Peterson.

The Englishman stirred, blinked, then levered himself up. "Water?"

"We drank it last night," I replied hoarsely.

He shook his head. "Check. They said they'd leave some and be back."

"They?" I went back to the truck and saw a canteen that I'd missed in the front, next to the cab. It took a bit of climbing but I finally retrieved it, and brought it back to where Langhorne was now sitting up.

He took a mouthful, swallowed half, then spat some of it into his hands, wiping them over his face. "That's better. The Rat Patrol, old man. I met up with Sergeant Moffitt last night, actually ended up face down in a camel thorn before he realized I wasn't a Jerry, and he said to stay put until they were done."

"Didn't listen, eh?" The water was nectar from the peach groves of heaven, but I just sipped. "Think we can get some of this into Peterson?"

Langhorne frowned. "We can try."

"What happened?"

"I crawled back just in time to nearly get shot by the Germans who were trying to surround the camp. Tripped over several bodies. Those commando chaps are cold-blooded killers, you know. They were taking them out one by one as fast as they could."

I shivered. Never thought of it that way. "I don't see any bodies."

"Once the shooting stopped, I heard the Germans going away and started for the fire. Then Private Hitchcock shot at me but missed. He was terribly apologetic. I crawled back into camp and found Lewis...dead." He pointed to the farthest pile of sand. "They buried him this morning. How are you feeling?"

"Feeling?" I felt somewhat lost. Lewis had been a good soldier and too young to die in a skirmish over empty barrels.

"Your head?"

I reached up and found a lump on my skull that I hadn't realized was there. "What happened?"

"Looks like a bullet hit that pot helmet you've been wearing," he said briskly. "You're lucky. I looked you over but you were still breathing. I thought I'd let you sleep it off."

"Yeah." I looked around at the stony ground. There were some new humps in the sand beside Lewis'. Maybe the Rat Patrol had buried the Germans they'd killed last night. Maybe not. "What'll we do now?"

"They said they'd radio for help. I think we just sit and wait." Peterson stirred. "Let's see if we can

get some water into him.”

He pulled the paper out of the typewriter and re-read what he had written.

The men who saved us are an Allied commando team known far and wide as the Rat Patrol. Because of them, Peterson will see more sunrises in Oklahoma. The team from the depot reached us several hours later, took Peterson back with them, gave us enough gasoline to reach to reach the coast, and a driver, and sent us on our way. I don't know what happened to Captain Dietrich but the fact that he said he'd come back to help us makes me hope for the future. If there are other Germans like him, then the survivors of this war might build a better Germany after we finish pounding them.

The Rat Patrol was on some mission that we'd probably never know about. They wage a war unknown to most soldiers of either army. The Germans and the Allies fight over the same sand that buries all traces of their passage. If it weren't for the clink of the dog tags swaying in the desert wind, or the flutter of a German war ribbon on their graves, you couldn't tell the dead apart.'

For Ernie Pyle, and all the war correspondents who go in the line of fire to bring back the news.